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AUTHOR Riley, Judith
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ABSTRACT

A stage in the development of new courses is discussed. Advice is given to course teams in the social sciences faculty at the Open University (England) on arranging for course team review of drafts of new courses. Several methods are discussed briefly: the traditional method of circulating drafts in the course team and having a discussion with the author; a modification of the traditional method that includes the chairman and/or academic editor in the draft writing; reflective discussion between the author and a single commentator; and written comments to the author, either as notes on the draft or separately submitted. External critical readers can also be used, as can trying out the course on students for credit or for a fee as a method of testing its possibilities. Appended are a staff memo on course testing and notes to course assessors. (MSE)

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IET

Institute of Educational Technology
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
Telephone (0908) 63546

COURSE
DEVELOPMENT
GROUP

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DISCUSSING AND EVALUATING DRAFTS

JUDITH RILEY

ABSTRACT

These notes summarize the advice I give to course teams in the Social Sciences Faculty on arranging for draft materials to be commented on by the course team; the strengths and problems of several different systems are considered. Materials used to select and brief tutors as critical readers and to brief external assessors are included. Three different systems of developmental testing are discussed: for credit, the 1 + 7 approach and for a fee.

CD 3 Correspondence texts/Critical Readers/Developmental testing/External Assessors

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DISCUSSING AND EVALUATING DRAFTS

PREFACE...

These notes summarise the advice that I give to course teams in the Social Sciences Faculty. I know that other members of IET would give rather different advice on some topics and that I would not make the same suggestions to teams in other faculties. The notes are meant as temporary records of the way we do things and I expect to redraft them at intervals to include examples of innovations, to take account of your comments, or as I continue to learn and to change my views. These notes form part of a series for Social Science course teams, the others can be obtained from me, Judith Riley(x3546).

WHY BOTHER?

The easiest course of action is to rely on the course team to read each others' drafts and discuss them at meetings. However some teams have spent extra effort on organising the evaluation of drafts and do seem to judge it to have been well worthwhile: the materials are thought to be improved and authors learn from the experience.

I describe three kinds of techniques below: course team commenting, external critical readers and assessors, and developmental testing. My comments are designed to help you choose the most suitable approach in each of these three areas for your course and then to save you time in organising whatever techniques you've chosen.

COURSE TEAM COMMENTING: TRADITIONALLY...

Traditionally the draft of each unit is circulated to the course team and then at a team meeting they comment on it to the author, who subsequently goes away to redraft the unit. This system of commenting gives an author a broad range of views from the whole team, ensures all the team are aware of the contents of each draft and the force of face-to-face reactions can be very convincing for an author who is resistant to making changes. It is also the expected method for many course teams.

However it has some grave disadvantages as normally practised: it is very frightening for most authors and in consequence they are too busy, thinking on their feet and trying to deflect criticism, to take in much of what is said. The team tend to be more concerned to avoid open conflicts and to protect their own positions than to offer penetrating comments; often very few members have read the draft

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carefully as they expect others to do this and hence many comments are negative and superficial. It might be made more effective by: giving the author a one-to-one discussion (e.g. with the chairman) before the meeting to defuse some of his fears and prepare him for the wider debate; tape-recording or very careful full minuting of the discussion by someone other than the author; 2-4 members made responsible for full reading of the draft and for sending additional written comments.

FOCUSED ON A PAPER...

A modified form of course team discussion is used in some Maths teams, where the discussion is focussed around a written paper, such as an analysis of changes recommended as a result of developmental testing feedback.

This approach has all the advantages of traditional discussion. In addition, in Maths the draft has been worked on by the chairman and/or academic editor as well as the original author, so there is some feeling of shared responsibility and the author is better prepared for the discussion; the focussing paper of recommendations, if the meeting is well chaired, ensures a constructive discussion of the whole draft and often matters of general principle for other units come up too. In Maths it is possible for members who have not studied the draft before the meeting to make helpful contributions in the discussion but this may not be as true of other subjects.

However, this method has the disadvantage of needing more time - from the author of the draft for preliminary discussion and redrafting and from someone else in preparing a focussing paper for the meeting.

REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION...

Another alternative is reflective discussion, between the author and a single commentator over an explicit representation of a particular aspect of the unit, for example an analysis of its conceptual structure with possible omissions and imbalances identified. The document is revised during the meeting and the author takes it away with him.

This system gives the author a chance to see his draft with new eyes; the discussion can be very penetrating; the author goes away with a document that, as it is revised during the meeting, records the discussion and shows the reasons behind its conclusions, and he may also have an agreed list of action to take. It is thought that some authors may learn to prepare their own analyses of their drafts, or even to write the drafts <u>after</u> analysing their proposed content, as a result of this method of commenting.

However, this method has the disadvantage of usually needing at least a week of very demanding work from someone other than the author in order to cover only a single aspect of the unit - in this case its conceptual structure; some authors might find this approach too unfamiliar and suggesting such major changes that they would find it unacceptable; and the course team as a whole is not forced to participate and study the unit.

WRITTEN COMMENTS...

Written comments, either as annotations on the draft or a separate paper, can provide detailed reactions and suggestions which the author can make use of in his own time and which do seem to be welcomed by authors and not felt as threatening as face-to-face discussion.

However, as commonly practised, this method is usually very poorly organised with authors receiving only a few sets of comments and often then only if they chase up team members to do it. Commentators tend to tail off towards the end of the unit, some are not very prolific, some comments do not advance the author's understanding of his problems, some are too unspecific to be helpful. The team send in their comments separately and do not see each others' reactions, so they cannot tell if the author has taken note of even a strong majority opinion.

This method could be made more effective by designating 2-4 commentators; by the author providing a brief for commentators, perhaps drawing from the lists of questions given in appendix B (consultants would need extra help on this); possibly by the major comments being written up as a separate paper (annotations may appear less carefully prepared); by an opportunity for the author to discuss the comments with the team, its chairman or IET.

WHICH SYSTEM TO CHOOSE?

In addition to the pros and cons of each approach which I've drawn attention to above, its probably worth considering:

- Which method do the course team expect and how open are they to change?
- What kind of comments will the author get from the team in the absence of any organised system and hence what will his greatest needs be?
- What's the author like as an individual - how experienced, how timid, how resistant to change...?

- How much time have the team got to spend on commenting and how does this fit into the author's schedule?

- How important is it for the whole team to discuss the points raised in comments?

- Which method appeals to the team for this particular unit?

Which ever method of commenting is chosen, it is probably worth designating one member of the team as responsible for ensuring that it really does happen for all units and doesn't tail off towards the end of the course.

TUTORS AS CRITICAL READERS...

External critical readers have been found to be a useful addition to course team commenting on drafts. On D302, DT201 and D204 a small panel of part-time tutors was used to supplement the predominantly content-oriented comments of the course team, with their predictions of the drafts' teaching effectiveness. Suitable tutors were found quite easily by a staff tutor on the team circulating all the relevant staff tutors with:

- a brief description of the course;

- a letter of explanation of the task we wanted done;

- a form that could be used to suggest a suitable part-time tutor.

The letter and the form used on D204 are given in appendix A.

Once about four tutors had been selected as having appropriate OU tutoring experience, they were given:

- a more detailed outline of the course and summaries of what was proposed for each unit;

- a set of forms to fill in with their comments on each unit.

The kinds of questions used on these forms were drawn from list 1 in appendix B.

After working on a batch of 3-6 units, the tutors met their authors with the team chairman, to argue their views and to hand over their written

reactions and annotated drafts. N.B. Most authors found the tutors' pressure to consider the students' problems raised issues which had not come up strongly in the internal team discussion of their drafts.

EXTERNAL ASSESSORS...

On D204 we used one overall assessor who based his judgements on the Course Outline and three others who each looked at the unit summaries for a separate section of the course. Their job was seen as acting as an early warning system, before any drafts were written and they were asked the questions given in list 2 in appendix B. If you have external assessors to read full unit drafts you might find the list 3 questions in that appendix a useful source of ideas.

DEVELOPMENTAL TESTING:

However experienced the team and its external aides are with OU students, the best test of the teaching effectiveness of the course is to try out the materials on students. There are basically three different ways of doing this:

FOR CREDIT...

Developmental testing for credit has now been completed successfully on A241 and A101 and is being tried by several other course teams (e.g. DU201). A small group of students with the appropriate prerequisites is invited to study the draft materials in a form which is as like the final version as possible. They take the draft assessment questions and exam for the award of a credit. They also complete extra questions about the difficulties they experience and, in some cases, meet the team at intervals to discuss their reactions. Research suggests that modifications made in response to such students' reactions on A241 significantly raised the grades that students achieved and reduced study time.

However this kind of testing needs a lot of organization and necessitates draft materials being ready on schedule. Timetabling drafts and meetings to fit in with authors' availability and the handover schedule to Operations is tricky with a half credit and very difficult for a full credit course. It is probably necessary to employ a part time research assistant to help devise the feedback questions, administer the trial run and analyse the results. If some important course components cannot be ready in time (e.g. TV programmes) this may invalidate the trial.

THE "1+7" APPROACH...

The 1+7 approach has been used in Technology and Science (e.g. TS251 and ST291). In this the first year of use of the materials is used to learn of needed modifications for the rest of the eight years life of the course. Unfortunately feedback arriving after about July of one year is too late to modify the next year's materials, so it is sometimes necessary to keep the unmodified materials for two full years. This approach can give very good information on the teaching effectiveness of the course but it is expensive for the OU and for the early students if major items have to be scrapped and it needs the course team to stay together during the first year of presentation. With the shorter course life and larger student numbers that are common in Social Science I could not recommend this approach to many teams. However this is what is happening on those few teams who do not plan any developmental testing of draft materials and rely instead on feedback in the first year of the course to pick up any outstanding problems.

TESTING FOR A FEE...

The traditional method of OU developmental testing, used on D101 for example, involves advertising in Sesame for a group of volunteers to test draft course materials for a small fee. This approach is less rigorous than developmental testing for credit and many volunteers drop-out or comment very sparsely but it has the advantage that it is less of a disaster if some draft materials arrive out of order or not at all, and they need not be studied over a normal student year. It probably shares with developmental testing for credit the advantage of acting as a spur on the team to try very hard to meet their schedules.

WHICH SYSTEM TO CHOOSE ?

Among the criteria I would suggest you use in selecting a scheme are:

(i) Are you doubtful about the whole course or particular components?

(ii) How much manpower can you devote to testing? Can you get someone from IET and/or a research assistant to help?

(iii) How can you fit testing into your schedule?

(iv) How good are the team going to be about keeping to that schedule?

(v) How long a life and how big a course population do you anticipate?

GETTING IT TOGETHER...

The three approaches for evaluating drafts: course team commenting, external readers and assessors, and developmentaltesting are not alternatives. Most course teams use a system with an element of all three approaches. Two hypothetical combinations are shown below:

APPENDIX A

Internal Memorandum

From Rees Pryce, Staff Tutor, Wales.

To All Staff Tutors in Social Sciences.

Subject D204 - Fundamentals of Human Geography
Developmental Testing of the Course.

Date 13 January 1976

As you know, a Course Team has been formed to make a new full-credit course at the second level of study to replace D281 - New Trends in Geography - for 1977. The Course Team is keen to carry out as full an evaluation of our course units as is possible during 1976 and early 1977. For various reasons it has been decided to obtain the services of experienced Course Tutors to participate in this evaluation and I am now writing to ask you if you can be kind enough to nominate appropriate tutors from amongst your staff on the enclosed forms.

In nominating tutors for this work it will be useful to bear in mind the following considerations:

1. Tutors should be able to react to the teaching material from the viewpoint of a student on a second-level course of study. Experience on courses with a significant geographical content such as D281 and DT201, therefore, will be most appropriate.

2. We are seeking to appoint tutors as consultants primarily for their ability to comment on the course units as teaching material and not to assess the course material from a strictly academic viewpoint as to content and balance. We already have distinguished geographers working as consultants on these more academic aspects.

3. The Course Team will be pleased to receive the nomination of one or two part-time tutors from every Staff Tutor. From this panel the Course Team itself will appoint the most appropriate part-time tutors as consultants.

4. Each tutor will be paid £10 for reading and commenting on each unit in draft. (It may be necessary to read more than one draft in the case of a few units.) * In addition, tutors will be required to attend occasional meetings at Walton Hall. Travelling (second-class rail fare) and subsistence expenses will be paid.

5. Because these consultants will be appointed primarily to comment on aspects of the course from a student's point of view, your nominee should be prepared to read each of the 32 units in draft. The Course Team does not seek consultants prepared to read only sections of the course. The draft units will have to be read as they are produced and for this reason you should nominate

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* It is hoped that following negotiations with the Course Resources Committee, the fee currently on offer will be substantially increased.

only those tutors who can turn to this work at short notice on successive occasions throughout the year.

6. Tutors will be expected to address themselves to the following main questions regarding D204:

   a) Do you think the student will be clear about what is expected of him in this unit/block?

   b) Does this material give the student a reasonable chance of obtaining the unit/block objectives?

   c) How many hours would you estimate for the students to study and complete each part?

   d) Do you see any important errors or crucial gaps in the material?

   e) Does the material seem at an appropriate level of interest and difficulty for second year students?

   f) Can you predict which areas will cause most difficulty to students?

   g) Do the SAQs, CMAs and/or TMAs related to the unit/block seem appropriate for this section of the course?

   h) Have you any ideas for exercises or essays that could be based on this material?

   Visits to Walton Hall by developmental testers will enable them to discuss their written comments concerning units with authors.

7. The Course Team wish to stress that they consider developmental testing to be a matter of major importance in the realisation of D204; thus all comments made by the developmental testers on the units as teaching material will be given the most carefull consideration.

Perhaps it is useful to add that the five tutors who have helped the D302 Course Team with developmental testing found the experience an enjoyable one. For those who were subsequently appointed as course tutors, the experience gained in developmental testing was particularly valuable.

I enclose two copies of the nomination forms and outline notes on the course which you may find useful in discussing this work with potential nominees. Would you be kind enough to return your nominations to Dr J.R. Blunden, D204 Course Team Chairman at Walton Hall, by 13 February 1976.

I am most grateful to you for your cooperation in this important matter which rightly falls within the province of the Staff Tutor.

WTRP/JRH

D204 DEVELOPMENTAL TESTING

From: name of Staff Tutor .....

Region .....

To: Dr J.R. Blunden, D204 Course Team Chairman,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
The Open University,
Walton Hall,
MILTON KEYNES,
MK7 6AA

Date:

I nominate the following experienced course tutor as a person who can be approached to assist in the developmental testing of Course D204: Fundamentals of Human Geography.

1. Name (Dr/Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms).....

2. Home Address .....

.....

.....

Work address .....

.....

.....

3. Telephone numbers: Day .....

Evening .....

4. Teaching experience within O.U.

Course	Year

Course	Year

5. Teaching experience outside the O.U. (please distinguish between full-time and part-time appointments and the level of work)

6. Academic qualifications

degree etc awarded with class and division	Date (Year)	University or awarding body

7. Remarks

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF BRIEFING QUESTIONS

List 1: Teachability Questions

1. Do you think students will have difficulty in achieving this unit's purposes? (set out as aims, key questions, objectives or "main purpose" on unit summary). N.B. Some students will not have studied D101.

2. Will students want to study it?

3. Looking at the table of Skills for this section (given in the Course Outline), which ones does this unit teach effectively? Could any others be taught in this unit?

4. Are all the new terms explained sufficiently?

5. Will most students manage this work in 7 hours (all that's left after broadcasts, writing TMAs etc.)?

6. Is there sufficient guidance in the unit on how to study it?

7. Are there enough chances for students to check their understanding, to practice what they've learned, to make links to previous studies, to stop and think?

8. Can all the proposed activities be done?

9. Will students attempt the SAQs?

10. Are the suggested CMAs and TMAs feasible? Will students learn more by doing them?

List 2: Overall Course Proposal Questions

1. The course is a second level one: 6 credits at levels one (Foundation level) and two are sufficient for an ordinary BA; 8 credits including some at levels three or four are required for honours. Do you think this section will be an appropriate academic standard?

2. Are the stated aims of the section appropriate for a course in Fundamentals of Human Geography? Do the aims of each unit, as expressed by the notes on its purpose, summary of syllabus and key questions, seem likely to cover the aims of the section?

3. Are there any serious omissions or any lack of balance in your view in the proposed syllabus? Can you suggest any alternative approaches or themes?

4. Does the order of the units seem appropriate, one leading logically to the next?

5. Do you think the format suggested is the optimum way to teach the material in the Open University system?

6. Can you suggest any additional key questions or other activities to aid in this process? What kind of assessment would you consider appropriate for this section?

7. Have you any other comments to make about the section as a whole or the contribution of any one of these units as currently outlined?

List 3: Questions for unit assessors

1. Are the objectives worthwhile? (what is their relative importance?)

2. Are they achieveable with this material?

3. Are the questions proposed, a valid test of them?

4. Are there any misrepresentations of other authors' positions?

5. Are there any opinions masquerading as facts?

6. Are any misrepresentative or unsuitable examples chosen?

7. Are any misleading analogies drawn?

8. Are proofs complete?

9. Are all the arguments presented, consistent?

10. Is an overview of the material possible?

Course outline to the overall external assessor for a written reaction.

Unit outlines to the overall assessor and to their appropriate block external assessors for written reactions These reactions are read out at course team meetings when each of the blocks of outlines is discussed in turn.

D1s to the appropriate block assessor and written comments are called for from him and two designated members of the course team. These are discussed at a meeting of all the team involved in that block.

D1s also go to the panel of tutors who bring their reactions to a meeting of the author concerned, his block chairman and the course team chairman.

D2s are discussed by the whole course team.

D1s discussed by author with course chairman.

D1s to two external assessors who meet to agree a written response to hand to the author.

D2s sent to students (to study the course for credit) who prepare a written reaction with their tutor to send to the whole course team.

D2s discussed by the whole course team.

Whichever combination of approaches is adopted, it seems to be important to:

- make someone responsible for implementing each stage;
- draw up detailed schedules for the preparation of drafts, mailings and meetings;
- bid for adequate resources, including for any extra research or clerical help that may be required

REFERENCES:

1 Riley, J. "How to use consultants successfully" and "Assessment", IET internal publications CD2 and CD4, 1978; other titles in preparation.

Judith Riley
March 1978

COURSE DEVELOPMENT GROUP PAPERS

CD1 NOTES ON THE EARLY STAGES OF COURSE PLANNING
by Philippe Duchastel, Roger Harrison, Euan Henderson, Barbara Hodgson, Adrian Kirkwood, Robert Zimmer

CD2 HOW TO USE CONSULTANTS SUCCESSFULLY
by Judith Riley

CD3 DISCUSSING AND EVALUATING DRAFTS
by Judith Riley

CD4 ASSESSMENT
by Judith Riley

CD5 INTRODUCING NEW FACULTY MEMBERS TO COURSE PRODUCTION
by Philippe Duchastel and Roger Harrison